

Australia and the Pacific islands: a loss of focus or a loss of direction?

by Sandra Tarte

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This is a guest post by Sandra Tarte of the University of South Pacific.

Recent claims in the media that Australia's foreign minister has 'ignored', 'neglected' and 'taken his eyes off' the Pacific islands have underscored a number of policy dilemmas facing Australian diplomacy in the region. These have been evident for some time and centre primarily around the [approach to Fiji's post-coup government](#), led by Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama.

Like other western democracies, Australia imposed diplomatic, military and political sanctions on the [military-led government](#) after the December 2006 coup. Australia also sought to utilise the Pacific Islands Forum to coordinate a regional approach to Fiji – initially based on engagement and dialogue to encourage an early return to elected government. When this approach failed, the Forum adopted more punitive measures, including suspending Fiji's Forum membership in May 2009 and excluding it from aid programs provided through the Forum.

The dilemmas facing Australian diplomacy and foreign policy in the region include the obvious ones that have been highlighted in the media debate.

Most prominent is the fact that Australia's efforts to isolate the Fiji government have encouraged [Fiji to actively seek new partnerships](#), including most notably with China. This has led to the growing influence of China, and what seems to be a commensurate loss of influence by Australia. Another obvious dilemma is that Fiji's suspension from the Forum has only served to undermine what was once the region's premier regional organisation and shifted the political focus to other regional and international groupings. Fiji has made it clear it does not seek an early return to the Forum's fold but is cultivating new alignments – the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Pacific Small Islands Developing States group, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Association of South East Asian Nations (where it has sought observer status).

There are other policy dilemmas for Australia, which have perhaps been less obvious. The suspension of Fiji from regional policy mechanisms – including security dialogues, intelligence sharing, and maritime surveillance – has not only weakened Fiji's capacity to manage its external security environment, but created additional security problems for the region, including for Australia and New Zealand.

Intelligence and capability gaps in Fiji's security apparatus have been created since the coup that cannot necessarily be filled by China, Indonesia or other new partners.

This problem – which is also a regional problem – has been compounded by the loss of experienced military officers from the senior ranks of Fiji's Military Forces, since the December 2006 coup. This has created what some have called a leadership vacuum in the armed forces and is due in large part to the exodus of senior professional officers into civil service positions in the Fiji government. Junior officers filling these vacated positions in the military no longer have the benefit of staff college training in Australia or other western countries, due to military bans.

As Australian policymakers no doubt grapple with these dilemmas there is inevitably a need to come to terms with a new regional 'ball-game'. Shifting international alignments and patterns of influence perhaps mean that the 'old regional order' – led by Australia and New Zealand – will no longer be tenable. There are new dynamics in train, which may mean more economic opportunities and more political options for some (though not all) Pacific island states. This is not necessarily a bad thing for either Australia or the region. There is now more talk – if not action – in favor of South-South cooperation.

Changing circumstances require a more flexible policy approach in order to harness the possible openings this more fluid landscape provides and adapt to new realities. For Australia this does not necessarily mean abandoning principles in its approach to Fiji, but of mapping a new direction. Fiji's so-called 'Look North Policy' has never purported to be a substitute for traditional partnerships, such as with Australia and New Zealand. Thus the door to dialogue and engagement has never been entirely shut. The challenge, however, is to ensure that both Australia and Fiji recognise the need to keep this door open – especially in the lead-up to Fiji's anticipated elections in 2014.

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